

Dungeons and Dragons, Magazines, and Business, and Everything In-Between

A history of TSR Inc. the creators of *Dungeons and Dragons*,
and their premiere publication, *Dragon Magazine*

ADAM R BROWN
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Introduction

Take a journey back to June 1976, to an old grey house in Lake Geneva, WI. About two months after the founding of Apple Computers, about a month before the US completes its withdrawal from Vietnam, and about 5 months before Jimmy Carter wins the presidency. The house doesn't look like much, it's nothing more than the personal residence of a former insurance salesman and small business owner. Within it however, are the seeds of a future multi-million dollar business, and a handful of men tirelessly working to bring their new hobby to the market. They don't work in this new frontier business for much money, they aren't making much anyway. They aren't in it for fame and glory, they all know that they belong to a sub-culture within a sub-culture. They are in it to have fun, and to show others around the nation what their passion looks like. This house belongs to E. Gary Gygax, and is the center of TSR Hobbies, a small startup responsible for the new tabletop game called *Dungeons and Dragons*, a role-playing game (RPG) that in less than 15 years would define an entire hobby industry. TSR Hobbies does not have many staff, neither does it have a professional office, instead operating out of Gygax's basement.

For the past year, TSR has been publishing a magazine entitled, *The Strategic Review*, a digest of various news in the war-gaming industry and a hobbyist magazine for Gygax and his friends in the Lake Geneva area. *The Strategic Review* never got more than seven issues, and acted mostly as an in house organ for Tactical Studies Rules (the name of TSR Hobbies in 1974-1975, before it reformed under TSR Hobbies). *The Strategic Review* formally ended its run in April of 1976 in anticipation for the next greatest thing. This next thing would be the first of its kind, though that fact was not a novel idea for TSR, whose business was predicated upon

publishing and selling the first pen-and-paper RPG in a market dominated by tactical war-games. Enter, *The Dragon*, an all-inclusive professional magazine devoted to fantasy and science fiction.

The Dragon is a fascinating window into the history of TSR, throughout TSR's tenure from 1974-1997 upon its sale to Wizards of the Coast. Indeed, TSR was more than just a frontrunner in the industry, it defined the RPG industry, and it defined the RPG culture. Much of the norms that seem so commonplace and integral to RPG culture in the modern day were pioneered by TSR in the 70's and 80's. For this however, they did not just use games. In fact, much of their cultural influence can be attributed to their main source of cultural dissemination, their professional magazine, *The Dragon*. In fact, *The Dragon* was the single most important facet of TSR's business and industry presence aside from *Dungeons and Dragons* itself. TSR was at its best a company with only mediocre management, and survived only because: *Dungeons and Dragons* was the first game of its kind, TSR was the first company to publish a game like *Dungeons and Dragons*, and *The Dragon* established itself and TSR as the beginning, center, and end of the role-playing game hobby. Like all media, *The Dragon* was a vehicle of cultural transference, a way for TSR to define and direct the minds of its customers. Beyond that however, it acted as way for advertisement, it acted as a feedback center for TSR, it acted as a patchwork system by which TSR could clarify rules and laws within its various RPGs to players, it acted as a platform for new creators to have their work seen, it acted as a tool, a control in which TSR could dictate how their products were being used, and it acted as a window into the inner workings of TSR and the RPG industry. There were many other magazines during the time of *The Dragon*, published by other companies that came up to rival TSR, such as GDW and Flying Buffalo, but those companies never came to rival the ubiquity and market control of TSR, and thus their magazines never came to rival the prowess and popularity of *The Dragon*.

However, one cannot understand *The Dragon* without understanding the history of TSR and the importance that *The Dragon* played in the success of TSR. This essay shall attempt to do two things: It shall attempt to trace the history, both the rise and fall of TSR Inc., and simultaneously shall explore the evolution and history of *The Dragon* in tandem with TSR, to explore the ways in which *The Dragon* came to be a defining element and pillar of the RPG hobby industry and culture.

The beginning of TSR is nebulous and very muddy. The idea for the company was an after-thought to the product, and the product itself, that being *Dungeons and Dragons*, was formulated over years of quiet and careful consideration. This context is vital to understanding the future history of TSR and the history of *The Dragon*, if only for there to be some continuity of events within the readers mind.

From the Beginning

I'm very fond of the medieval period, the Dark Ages in particular. We started playing in the period because I had found appropriate miniatures. I started devising rules where what the plastic figure was wearing was what he had. If he had a shield and no armor, then he just has a shield. Shields and half-armor = half-armor rules; full-armor figure = full armor rules. I did rules for weapons as well.

Sometimes, though, instead of fighting these mass battles, we would fight small battles where one player controlled one warrior. I'd say, 'O.K., you're the Viking warrior. Here's your figure. You're the Saxon warrior here's your figure.' After a while, though, the guys got tired of playing. I decided one day that we were going to play a little variation of medieval combat. I secretly told one side, 'O.K., you guys have a wizard in your group and here's what he can do: He can throw a fireball,' and the fireball rules were exactly the same as the heavy catapult. I then gave the other side a lightning bolt, which was the same as our medieval cannon.

- Gary Gygax, in an interview with GameSpy.com¹

¹ Rausch, Allen. *Gary Gygax Interview*. Interview with E. Gary Gygax. (Gamespy.com, 8/15/2004) <<http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/538/538817p1.html>>

The former quote perfectly encapsulates the thought process by which Gary Gygax and David Arneson would build on to create *Dungeons and Dragons*, which would in turn create Tactical Studies Rules. In the early 1970's Gary Gygax was an insurance salesman and avid war-gamer. At this time companies like Avalon Hill dictated this sub-culture with a plethora of miniature Napoleonic war games. Gygax created a medieval war-game called *Chainmail*, which the former quote is talking about. It wasn't much different from other war-games, save for its rules for man-to-man combat.²

Earlier, in 1969, David Arneson was gaming with an amateur game designer named Dave Wesley who created a Napoleonic war-game called *Braunstein*, that included rules for individuals units that had special objectives within a battle scenario. Later that year, at the second Gen Con, the International Federation of War Gamers annual convention, Arneson met Gygax, and would include Gygax in games of *Braunstein*. Eventually, Arneson combined both *Braunstein* and *Chainmail* into a new medieval war-game called *Blackmoor*, which included a pseudo-level system by which characters could gain experience between each battle³.

Gygax founded the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association (LGTSA) in early 1970 as a hobby group for war-gaming in the Lake Geneva area. In 1971, David Arneson took his game *Blackmoor* to Gygax and the LGTSA in an effort to display his game, and the two began to collaborate on a game they dubbed *The Fantasy Game*. This nascent game was simplistic, and yet, revolutionary. Gygax decided that this new game needed a better name, one that wasn't so generic, and so he drew up a two-part table with various evocative words. "Tunnels", "Trolls", "Goblins", and "Dungeons", were all words that could possibly have been used in the name.

² Appelcline, Shannon. *Designers and Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry, The '70s*. (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2014) Pg. 8

³ 2 *ibid.* Pg. 9

Eventually, Gygax settled on *Dungeons and Dragons* and began to spread the word about his game.⁴⁵

Gygax took *D&D* to a company called Guidon Games whom Gygax had published a few of his war-games through before. Though Gygax met with resistance there as Guidon was downsizing and didn't have the capital to try their hand at this new game.⁶

Initially *Dungeons and Dragons* got little attention, and Gygax was giving up hope on his new game, until a group of players who liked the game showed up at Gen Con VI in 1973, and espoused their love of Gygax's creation. So that year, Gygax and Don Kaye, a childhood friend of Gygax and fellow member of the LGTSA, founded Tactical Studies Rules to print *D&D*.⁷

Tactical Studies Rules faced initial money problems, and so opted to print another of Gygax's war-game designs, a game called *Cavaliers and Roundheads*. This game was a very standard medieval war-game that in end, didn't sell very well. Tactical Studies Rules did not gain the money they had hoped to publish *D&D* and were at a loss. Brian Blume, another member of the LGTSA was their savior by investing \$2000 of his personal funds to finance the publishing of *D&D*. Thusly, Blume was accepted as a third partner into Tactical Studies Rules and *D&D* saw its first few thousand print copies in January 1974.⁸

Duly noted here that Arneson was removed from the process of publishing *D&D* because he did not have any funds to invest into Kaye and Gygax's company at its outset. This trend would continue as Arneson would be nearly completely ostracized from the development of the

⁴ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 10-13

⁵ Sacco, Ciro Alessandro. *The Ultimate Interview with Gary Gyax*. Interview with E. Gary Gyax. The Kyngdoms.com. <<http://www.thekyngdoms.com/interviews/garygyax.php>>

⁶ 4 *ibid.* Pg. 14

⁷ 6 *ibid.* Pg. 15

⁸ 7 *ibid.* Pg. 15-16

game he helped create, and only further widened the rift between Gygax and Arneson that had started as early as the preliminary development of *D&D*.

In January of 1975, Don Kaye suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 37. This tragedy shook Tactical Studies Rules and the company reformed as TSR Hobbies Inc. as a reaction to this event, and relocated from Kaye's dining room to Gygax's house. The company continued to publish throughout 1975, and this place begins the true upward trajectory of TSR Hobbies.⁹

The Strategic Review

In spring 1975, TSR Hobbies published its first newsletter by which it attempted to inform and advertise to its members and subscribers. This newsletter was titled *The Strategic Review*. This newsletter served as the predecessor for *The Dragon* a year and a half later, and only was printed for 7 issues before being discontinued. *The Strategic Review* is interesting as it really helps outline the development of both TSR Hobbies and of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

In the first issue of the newsletter, the very first section explains what the purpose of the newsletter is. Without explaining very much of what *The Strategic Review* is meant to do, it merely states that each issue will “[...]contain as many features and news items as we can possibly find space for[.]” and that it will try to “cover as much as possible”. The stated intent is to display advertisements for all of TSR's line of products including new distributed games, but this line does belie TSR's intent to use this newsletter as more than just a vehicle of advertisement.¹⁰

⁹ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 17

¹⁰ *The Strategic Review* 1, Spring 1975

The first issue sold for 50 cents, a very cheap price at the time that translates to about \$2 today. It weighs in at a measly 6 pages and is published with little to no art. This is to be expected of a company that is barely starting out, especially one that is publishing out of Gygax's basement.¹¹

For *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first issue introduces what would become a very iconic enemy within the *D&D* universe, the Mind Flayer. The tables displayed and the gaming jargon used would be lost upon many who don't know how to read it, but one can glean a bit of design elements from this "Creature Feature" as the newsletter calls it. The creature is described in light detail, being nothing more than a man-shaped creature with tentacles and a telepathic ability to attack people, but the abilities are described in much more detail through a table. Giving various ways for characters to resist the creature, there is very little math involved. Players require an amount of various numbers that represent their abilities and check them against the table provided to determine the outcome of the mind flayers mind blast. Even the treasure gained from the creature references another table. The focus on various tables is very similar to the way war-games work, where players check numbers they roll against another table to determine the outcome of a skirmish. A non-war-gamer would have a tough time deciphering all of this text, and even if they read the rules for *D&D*, the mindset of a war-gamer and the centrality of table cross-referencing is not obvious.¹²

Other features of the first issue include a solo dungeon adventure written by Gygax himself. This article talks about the ways to design a dungeon, and this deserves a little bit of discussion on its own. The Original *Dungeons and Dragons* was not about stories, long and open in expansive worlds, these types of adventures would not be readily available until such settings

¹¹ Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

¹² Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

books as *The World of Greyhawk* is published in 1983. Gygax here discusses with his readers the ways in which one can design an adventure for *D&D*, and very clearly describes the ways in which one should go about designing a dungeon. Gygax appears here to be directing the subscribers in the ways in which *D&D* is to be played. Later on, especially with the publishing of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* between 1977 and 1979, it would become very obvious the intent of Gygax to strictly control the ways in which his game was played.¹³

At this time, TSR was still very heavily involved in the war-game industry. *D&D* was popular, but they didn't want to give up their war-game sales completely. The Strategic Review dedicates half of its final page, and the only two advertisements within its pages to *Star Probe* and *Warriors of Mars*, two war-games that take place in a futuristic setting and in modern day respectively. Neither of these games would go on to sell very well, and both games would open at \$5.00, exactly half the price of the *D&D* booklets, which sold much better despite their steep price.¹⁴

The second issue, released summer of 1975, displays prominently on the first page a memorial and a dedication to Don Kaye who had died earlier that year. The first issue most likely did not include this information because it was drafted before Kaye's death in January of that year.¹⁵

In an editorial by Brian Blume, he says: "TSR is not around solely to make money. The members of TSR are long-time gamers who have found that there is a great deal of satisfaction in creating and/or publishing a good set of game rules or an enjoyable game." TSR was not a very profitable company at the time, and though it was growing quickly, most of the members of TSR

¹³ Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

¹⁴ 13 *ibid*

¹⁵ Strategic Review 2, Summer 1975

were living mostly on savings and other sources of income. Though Blume later reversed this quote and showed his intent to make money first through his actions as TSR grew bigger, this quote is important to understanding the dedication and mindset of early TSR.¹⁶

Included in this second issue is a section on rules clarification for *Cavaliers and Roundheads*, which by this point was selling well enough, but still nowhere near enough to truly justify its continued support, and announcements about war-gaming news, including advertisement for Gen Con VII and Origins I, another war-gaming convention.

As noted later in this issue, the first supplement to *D&D Greyhawk*, was published early due to an unnamed “surge of income”. Nonetheless, this is the first ad seen for *Greyhawk* and marks the first supplement published for *D&D*, a momentous occasion that would be followed up by hundreds upon hundreds more supplements. *Greyhawk* is important not just for being the first supplement to *D&D*, but for being a supplement to a game. In the war-gaming world, continually reprinting and editing a game was common, but continuous expansion via supplements was not.

In addition, later in this issue is seen the first additional class for *D&D* published in a magazine, the Ranger. *D&D* had already had two other additional classes named. Thieves were introduced in Game Players Newsletter #9, another magazine, and Paladins were introduced in the Greyhawk supplement.¹⁷ This ranger class is described with a lot of descriptive detail, but like all classes in *D&D* at the time, the class determined the characters ability, and nothing else. By virtue of being a ranger, a character had the ability to do certain things, such as “...track the path of most creatures when outdoors, and even in dungeons they are often able to follow.” There was no place for a ranger that couldn’t track in *D&D* at the time, for if they couldn’t track,

¹⁶ Strategic Review 2, Summer 1975

¹⁷ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 17

they weren't a ranger. This trend is reversed in the editions of *D&D* published by Wizards of the Coast, in which any class is available to nearly any character regardless of their abilities, though characters built a certain way would be better at certain classes.

In issue two the break-neck speed of TSR's publishing begins to emerge. TSR had barely created the first supplement for *D&D* and was already announcing its next two full RPG's. *Boot Hill* and *War of Wizards*. The first was a game about wild-west gun fighting and the second was a game designed by M.A.R. Baker about dueling sorcerers. The actual games themselves are not important, but their existence and ready advertisement does indicate the tireless work and varied interest that TSR was attempting to capture.¹⁸

The next few issues of *The Strategic Review* would follow the likeness of the first two. Differences between these issues are very little, and by the 6th issue, TSR was already planning to retire *The Strategic Review* in favor of publishing *The Dragon*.¹⁹

Issue three gives little to talk about beyond the announcement of TSR's newest game *Empire of the Petal Throne (EPT)*, again by M.A.R. Baker. *EPT* is an important game for its inclusion of a skill system. As was mentioned before, in *D&D*, the class of a character determined the ability of the character. A thief could naturally open locks by virtue of being a thief, and simply rolled a high enough number on their dice to do so. With a skill system, one could be a thief with little to no skill in picking locks, but instead could be very good at doing acrobatics by having a high acrobatics skill and low lock picks skill.²⁰

Issues #4 through #6 discuss the creation of *The Dragon* and more information about upcoming war gaming events, and discussion about TSR endorsed gaming groups around the

¹⁸ Strategic Review 2, Summer 1975

¹⁹ Strategic Review 6, Summer 1976

²⁰ Strategic Review 3, Fall 1975

Lake Geneva area. Notable during this time between September 1975 and January 1976 was the hiring of periodicals editor Tim Kask, who would be instrumental in the direction and definition of *The Dragon* as its first editor, a small autobiography by Gygax and Blume, the inclusion of art in issue #5, and continued announcements of development within TSR, and the advertisement and publishing of *DUNGEON!*, a casual board-game inspired by *D&D* and written by an independent at the time named Dave Megarry, who would later come to work at TSR.²¹

In the last two issues of *The Strategic Review*, there is an appearing of two fiction short-stories, *Quest for the Vermillion Volume* by Robert Kuntz, a designer within TSR, and *What Price Gold and Glory?* By Jim Hayes. In addition, there appears the reader feedback section “Out on a Limb” in the final issue in which TSR takes in reader responses to publications and games, as well as ideas by TSR patrons. These two facets of true competitive publishing will be integral to the development of *The Dragon* as a real magazine later on. Their appearance within *The Strategic Review* does indicate that under Tim Kask, TSR publications was going to become more than a house organ, and indeed that is exactly what it became.²²

The Strategic Review laid the groundwork for what would become *The Dragon*, but it did not accomplish anything near what *The Dragon* did. This publication strove to cover “as much as it could” and it did cover quite a lot, providing a window into the workings of TSR, but it was not much more than that, a window. It was, at its core, a house organ. A newsletter by which TSR advertised and informed its members. *The Dragon* would be different, *The Dragon* would become a cultural medium, a window not just into TSR but into gaming culture, and would continue and expand upon the precedent set by *The Strategic Review*.

²¹ *Strategic Review* 4-6, Winter 1975 – Summer 1976

²² *Strategic Review* 5-6, Spring 1976 – Summer 1976

The Early Years: Dragon #1 (June 1976) – Dragon #49 (Aug 1981)

The Dragon #1 released in June 1976, and from then on would publish monthly with only a few hiatuses over the years, though the magazine would suffer many changes, shifts, and modifications over the years. In the early years of TSR and *The Dragon*, the Gygaxian influence is undeniable. *The Dragon* was at its core a magazine, and with Timothy J. Kask as the leader of TSR Periodicals and the Editor of TSR, *The Dragon* was a competitive magazine. “That mission is to publish the best magazine devoted to Sword & Sorcery, Fantasy, Science Fiction and Role Playing gaming”²³ Tim Kask made it clear that *The Dragon* was more than just a house organ, and would attempt to push the borders of RPG gaming and RPG culture through a number of various means. *The Dragon* represented and reflected a host of business and cultural design paradigms both within TSR and within the RPG industry, and during these years between ’76 and ’81, *The Dragon* flexed its boundaries and innovated in many ways as a magazine and a gaming resource.

In 1976, role playing games were very niche, a niche within a niche. War games at this point dominated the market, and the audience that an RPG magazine could hope to gather would be a subsection of the war game audience. In addition, nearly every leader and employee within TSR Hobbies and TSR periodicals were avid war gamers. TSR and *The Dragon* would not attempt to shy away from its war gaming roots. TSR heavily advertised all aspects of *Dungeons and Dragons*, including full page ads for new supplements, the first of which is entitled “Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes”. Each issue includes a number of articles that clarify rules of *D&D* and introduce new features, but this is interspersed with wargaming advertisement. *The Dragon*

²³ The Dragon #1, June 1976

included half to full page ads for war gaming miniature manufacturers, the premiere of which were Der Kriegspielers, and Miniature Figurines Ltd. The so-called “Largest Manufacturer of Wargame Figures in the World, Wholesale and Retail”²⁴ Many of the beginning issues included a section entitled “Wargaming World” in which news of new war gaming companies and new war games were announced and discussed. At this time, Gen Con, the Lake Geneva, WI based war game convention was still referred to specifically as a war game convention.²⁵ The readership of *The Dragon* were assuredly all war game enthusiasts themselves, and would appreciate war gaming discussion and news even though *The Dragon* was a stated RPG magazine. *The Dragon* in this way was attempting to bridge the gap between war games and *Dungeons and Dragons* in a welcoming environment to readers. *D&D* players would find entertainment and information in the war gaming news, and hopeful players would be interested in the war gaming news, possibly reading it for interest in the war gaming news, and hopefully becoming interested in the RPG elements.

Advertising to the varied interests of *The Dragon* readers was of seeming importance to TSR Periodicals. Some of these interests lie in books and reading. The first issue of *The Dragon* includes two pieces of fiction, the first entitled “The Search of the Forbidden Chamber” by Jake Jacquet and the second is entitled, “The Gnome Cache” by Garrison Ernst.²⁶ Jacquet's story is only two pages long, but the story by Ernst is much longer and is continued in later issues. Both are written in a very fantastical prose meant to excite the reader, and Ernst ends his story on a cliffhanger with a “to be continued” hinting that more will show up in the next issue. These pieces of fiction serve a few purposes. As before, it can be assumed that readers of *The Dragon*

²⁴ The Dragon #2, August 1976

²⁵ 24 ibid

²⁶ The Dragon #1, June 1976

held varied interests. It is obvious that fans of war games and role playing games would also be interested in fantasy short stories. *The Dragon* included these stories as a form of entertainment to their readers. In addition, the inclusion of short stories were a way to connect to their audience. Within a few issues, *The Dragon* started to include reader-submitted fiction. This fiction not only was a way for *The Dragon* to create a connection to their more creative audience, but also to enrich the storytelling capabilities of *Dungeons and Dragons* fans. *D&D* is a cooperative storytelling game, and reading fiction is commonly considered an important method of improving one's own storytelling abilities. Finally, as perhaps the most mundane reason for including works of fiction, *The Dragon* was simply attempting to fill pages. *The Dragon* #1 published in June 1976 at only 32 pages²⁷, though would later reach up to over 100 pages. Even within this almost 10 of those 32 pages, a little over a quarter of total page length was spent on these stories. Later as the issues got bigger, the fiction became less important and took up less of a percentage of total page length, but within these early issues, fiction represented a significant proportion of the print. The Strategic Review #6²⁸ came in at 24 pages, and as an in house organ and newsletter, that length is fine. However, for a competitive professional magazine, having so few pages as The Strategic Review would represent a lack of writing material, and perhaps a lack of creativeness on the part of *The Dragon* writers.

In 1977 Eric J. Holmes, a doctor and professor of neurology approached TSR with an offer to write an introductory version of *D&D*. Thus, he wrote the *Dungeons and Dragons* Basic Set, a game with severely curtailed rules and its own standard world known as "Mystara". This was meant to make the game more accessible to a wider audience in an effort to recruit new players. This game was also meant to encourage young people and children to play *D&D* by

²⁷ The Dragon #1, June 1976

²⁸ Strategic Review 6, Summer 1976

consolidating the core of *D&D* play into a cohesive unit. However, when one examines *The Dragon*, there can be found little to no support for Basic *D&D* within the pages. There are no large ads given to Basic *D&D*, and most of the articles in this early period of *The Dragon* pertain more to Gygax's Advanced *D&D* which he wrote and released in four volumes from 1977-1979, mean to be the "real" *D&D* system named as such to serve as a foil to its "basic" counterpart. It is then surprising that Basic *D&D* sold very well, moving well over 4000 units per month by the end of 1978.²⁹ These rules clarifications, monster and "creature features", and articles on playing *AD&D* (Advanced *D&D*) were all an attempt to control the way the game was played. This is not to say that it didn't serve another purpose, as *D&D* severely needed a clarification and consolidation, as the original print and rules were spread out over seven books and multitudinous *The Dragon* articles, and *AD&D* provided this. In *The Dragon* #16, Gygax himself states, "Additions to and augmentations of certain parts of the *D&D* rules are fine. Variants which change the rules so as to imbalance the game or change it are most certainly not."³⁰ This statement may seem innocent and reasonable, but there are numerous articles appearing mostly in Gygax's "Sorcerers Scroll" sections, from which the previous quote is derived, in which Gygax repeatedly dictates how certain rules are supposed to be interpreted. In *The Dragon* #15, the article deals with scale in a battleground³¹, *The Dragon* #23 dictates the ways in which game leaders are supposed to randomly generate "creatures from the lower planes", aka demons.³² So, why would Gygax and TSR want to control the way other people played a game about imagination and improvised storytelling? The answer lies in the obvious history of Gygax, Blume, Kaye, and other TSR employees. Their roots lie in war games, and thus their design

²⁹ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons*, Pg. 31

³⁰ *The Dragon* #16, July 1978

³¹ *The Dragon* #15, June 1978

³² *The Dragon* #23, March 1979

paradigm is rooted in war game design. War games are severely limited in scope and playability. A war game is not equipped to simulate all the environments that *D&D* is supposed to simulate. War games only take place on battlefields, there is no transition between combat and non-combat, the army units are not central characters in a storytelling experience, the player doesn't need to put themselves in the shoes of a soldier to play a war game, and finally, war games are competitive. Thusly the rules of war games need to be very strict, and though certain rules can be interpreted, they cannot be reimaged, otherwise they break the balance of the game and thus the fairness of play. In role-playing games, changing and reimagining rules is much easier, made clear by the multitude of role playing games published in the wake of *D&D* from *D&D*-esque games like *Tunnels and Trolls* by Flying Buffalo Games in 1975 and *Traveller* by Game Designers Workshop in 1977, to severely divergent games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* from White Wolf Games in 1991, each with their own very different set of rules to reimagine what it means to be a role playing game. *The Dragon* served as a method and a medium to exert control over *D&D* in an attempt to dictate the way the game was played through its consistent dictation and clarification of rules and gameplay methods.

Mentioned previously was the game *Traveller* by Game Designers Workshop (GDW), published in 1977. *Traveller* was a science fiction role-playing game published with a focus on life stories, mortality, travel, and strife on a local level with materialist focus within a capitalist system. As an aside, one can see the slow diversification already within the RPG design industry by observing the design elements of *Traveller* vs. *D&D* and its focus on adventure, morality, and heroic action on an ever expanding scale of importance rewarded through personal advancement and power. By this time TSR was publishing games like *Boot Hill*, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, and most importantly *Metamorphosis: Alpha*, by James M. Ward, TSR's own in-house Sci-fi

game. This last one is particularly important because it directly opposed and competed with *Traveller*. However, *Traveller* remained the king of the sci-fi genre. *D&D* still maintained dominance over the whole market, but GDW ruined the possibility of TSR capturing the sci-fi RPG subgenre in addition to the medieval fantasy RPG subgenre.³³ Thus it is peculiar that around *The Dragon* #20 to *The Dragon* #40, there appear various advertisements for *Traveller*.³⁴ *The Dragon* didn't serve as a house organ. Kask specifically stated that *The Dragon* wasn't going to be a sounding board³⁵ for how great TSR items were. Even though TSR Periodicals published *The Dragon*, it wasn't going to be the same thing that The Strategic Review was. *The Dragon* was a competitive published RPG magazine that would advertise for anyone who paid the advertising fees. *The Dragon* was not the puppet of TSR in these early years. Though it can be stated that those who read *The Dragon* were primarily *D&D* fans, and that the vast majority of *The Dragon* content is about *D&D* and other TSR products, the mere existence of ads for other games, especially those games that directly competed, and oftentimes outcompeted TSR product lines, such as *Traveller*, indicates the purposefully neutral stance that *The Dragon* took toward TSR during this time.

Around this time TSR was coming under fire from religious groups and concerned parents who felt that playing *Dungeons and Dragons* was satanic or corrupting to youth. At the time in the late 70's, the movement against *D&D* and TSR was relatively small and fringe, and so little attention was paid to it by TSR Periodicals. This hysteria went all the way back to the publishing of *Eldritch Wizardy*, an expansion to the original *D&D* box set, published in 1976. However, a single event would catapult *D&D*, TSR, and the whole RPG industry onto the

³³ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 25

³⁴ *The Dragon* 20-40, Nov 1978 – Aug 1980

³⁵ *The Dragon* 1, June 1976

mainstage and into the news. In late 1979, in Lansing, Michigan, James Dallas Egbert III, a student at Michigan State University, disappeared. Normally this wouldn't be very big news nationwide, but private detective William Dear drew a connection between Egberts disappearance and his habit of playing *D&D*. The authorities were convinced of this as well, and actually sent a "secret map" made of tacks arranged across a bulletin board that Egbert displayed in his room, to TSR. Gyax, Blume, and Kask spent multiple days attempting to sift through this bulletin board to discern its meaning, while in the meantime, the authorities recovered Egbert in Morgan City, Louisiana. By this time however, Dear had already gone public with his suspicions, and multiple groups began to lambaste *D&D*, the news plastering the name of *D&D* connected to the disappearance of the boy. Much to the chagrin of Dear and the movement against *D&D*, the news coverage given to the game was better advertising than TSR could ever hope to muster. "I had projected grown for the year to go from approximately \$4.2 million to \$8.5 million for that fiscal year. Because of the 'Egbert Affair,' TSR grossed \$16.5 million." Gyax said in an interview in the *OD&Dities* magazine February 2003 issue.³⁶ Many cities began to ban the sales of *D&D*, though it made little difference, and oftentimes increased sales of the game. About a year after the affair in 1980, Egbert committed suicide, prompting the release of a book entitled *Mazes and Monsters* in 1981, written by Rona Jaffe, which was made into a TV movie starring Tom Hanks in 1982, though neither of these had any noticeable effect in the public eye. Peculiarly through this entire fiasco, little to nothing of it appears in the pages of *The Dragon*. It would not be unexpected for the readers of *The Dragon* to want to keep abreast of the news and hear the opinions of TSR Periodicals on the issue, but the entire division seemed to have decided to be silent on the issue. Perhaps it is because that *The Dragon* did not want to

³⁶ Smale, Erin D. *An Interview with Gary Gyax, Part I*. Interview with E. Gary Gyax. *OD&Dities Fan Magazine* #9, February 2003.

distress readers with this kind of news. The players of *D&D* already knew that the game most likely did not drive the boy to disappear and that the connection Dear was making was sensational at best, so hearing about this news would be annoying at best, and distressing at worst. *The Dragon* was a magazine that talked about *D&D* and RPG news, and this wasn't RPG news. This was tabloid hysteria, and *The Dragon* did not partake in that.³⁷

After *The Dragon* #34, Kask left the editor role and moved onto his own magazine called *Adventure Gaming*, that would only last a couple of years, but resembled his issues in *The Dragon*. Up until this point, it was obvious that Kask held *The Dragon* as a hobby publication under his strict supervision. Everything was very much in his control, and he exercised a very tight grip on the direction and philosophy of *The Dragon*. After Kask left, Jake Jacquet, the publisher of *The Dungeoneer*, a magazine that opened around the same time as *The Dragon*, became the publisher of *The Dragon*, changing the name to simple *Dragon*. In his tenure as editor, *Dragon* jumped from 10,000 to 70,000 in circulation from 1980-1982. During this time, TSR had published a spy game entitled *Top Secret* written by Merle M. Ramussen and another sci-fi game entitled *Gamma World* by James Ward, and founded TSR UK in 1980, a subsidiary in Britain. After *Dragon* #48, Jacquet stepped up to the publisher role and left the editor-in-chief role of *Dragon* to Kim Mohan, a Chicago born TSR Periodicals employee and former freelance news writer. During this time, Brian Blume's father, Melvin, sold all his stocks to his other son, Kevin and left TSR. This left the two Blumes and Gygax as the tripartite leaders of TSR, with Kevin managing the company as Chief Operations Officer. The Blumes began to become uneasy at the conservative business decisions of Gygax and so orchestrated a takeover while simultaneously firing most everyone who disagreed with their dominance within TSR. Gygax

³⁷ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 45

was forced to step down as CEO, a tenure he'd held since the company's inception, and was more-or-less exiled to California to manage a new division of TSR dealing with TV and movie opportunities.³⁸

The Golden Years: Dragon #50 (Sep 1981) – Dragon #199 (Nov 1993)

These are the golden years of TSR and *Dragon*. With the acquisition of Simulations Publications Inc. (SPI), the publishers of *Dragonquest* (another RPG released in 1980) and a member of the old-guard of war game publishing companies alongside the likes of Avalon Hill³⁹, the opening of TSR UK, the foray of TSR into media, and *Dragon* under the watchful eye of Kim Mohan, both *Dragon* and TSR were poised to enter an age of prosperity. At this time, the RPG industry was growing rapidly, with TSR being named one of the six fastest growing private companies in 1982 by INC Magazine⁴⁰

Dragon expanded its repertoire in this time as well, and expanded upon many others. One of these areas of expansions is in its mode of storytelling, specifically the use of comics. Since some of the very first issues of *The Dragon*, the magazine printed comic strips like *The Disenchanted Forest*, and *The Adventures of Finieous Fingers*⁴¹, usually near the end of the issue. However these early comics were not very big, mostly no more than a quarter- to a half-page at most. By *Dragon* #55, the *Wormy* comic about a lovable ogre traveling through the forest takes an entire page in itself. In addition, many of the issues around #55 included a second full-page comic entitled *What's New?*⁴² In which Phil Foglio and Dixie Null, both writers for TSR Periodicals would discuss interesting things about RPG and War Gaming through a comic strip

³⁸ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 49

³⁹ 38 *ibid.* Pg. 50

⁴⁰ Alsop II, Stewart. *TSR Hobbies Mixes Fact and Fantasy*. Inc. Magazine, Feb 1, 1982. <<http://www.inc.com/magazine/19820201/3601.html>>

⁴¹ *The Dragon* 6, April 1977

⁴² *Dragon* #55, Nov 1981

instead of the standard article format. *Dragon* #55 talks about how couples can use their bed and their own body to shape a war game battlefield, and despite being a little unnecessarily sexualized, this comic is entertaining and informative. *Dragon* was expanding upon its storytelling capabilities at this time, including longer pieces of fiction and longer comic strips. The aforementioned Blumian revolution had removed a lot of people from TSR, and under Kim Mohan, *Dragon* was going to become much more popular and mainstream than it was before. There were new innovations needed, and expansions in the right areas, and storytelling was a very important part of an RPG magazine. As before, storytelling and fiction in the magazine served not only as entertainment, but as inspiration for individual games that readers would make. Expanding upon this fiction and storytelling was important, but not just in prose. Comics were an important method of short storytelling and appealed to a younger crowd as well as a more casual crowd of readers.

With Gygax gone at this time from TSR Hobbies creative department, the Gygaxian style of control over *D&D* lessened, especially within *Dragon*. The early issues of *Dragon* included very strict rules clarifications and discussions on specific rule usage within the game. After Gygax left the creative department of TSR however, *Dragon* lost some of that controlling nature. In *Dragon* #60, John Lee wrote an article discussing the meaning and philosophy of *D&D* alignments. (Alignments refer to the general moral compass of a character on a two-axis plane of Good-Neutral-Evil, and Lawful-Neutral-Chaotic) This discussion is very different from the granular rules discussions of earlier issues.⁴³ John Lee is having a conversation with the reader about the philosophy behind a design decision. Sharing with the reader a topic of interest and explaining what many of these things mean, but with one key difference, there is no clear

⁴³ *Dragon* #60, April 1982

direction on how to use alignments. Many of the rules in the original and advanced *D&D* include very strict alignment restrictions for certain classes, such as Paladins, a class of holy-warriors, being required to be Lawful-Good. This means that a character that is a Paladin must follow the law and a good moral creed, and by doing those things becomes eligible to be a paladin. Likewise, Druids must remain Neutral, and cannot have a strong moral compass toward either good or evil, and cannot favor being a law-breaker vs. a law-abider. This article by John Lee does not address these types of restrictions, and only discusses what it means to be a lawful-neutral fighter like a guard, or a chaotic-good thief like Robin Hood. *Dragon* was looking to expand its topics of discussion away from just rules, and to move away from attempting to control its audience. This by no means says that TSR still did not want control of their game, they did, but *Dragon* sought to step away from this in much the same way that TSR stepped away from Gygax.

Katherine Kerr came to TSR Periodicals around this time as well with a great new idea that had only been cursorily explored before this point, celebrity characters. In *Dragon* #5, Gygax wrote an article claiming that Gandalf, the famous wizard of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, was only a fifth-level wizard.⁴⁴ However, this topic was not covered much more until much later. Appearing 50 issues later in *Dragon* #55, Kerr writes an article detailing the character build of Robin Hood and his merry men.⁴⁵ Though minor, the existence of this new sections shows the ongoing attempts by *Dragon* to bridge the gap between RPG gaming and other forms of media. By bringing familiar characters into the *D&D* universe, *Dragon* was attempting to entice potential RPG gamers to begin playing with the thought of perhaps meeting or playing as Robin Hood. It is a common problem among RPG's that new players often have

⁴⁴ The *Dragon* #5, March 1977

⁴⁵ *Dragon* #55, November 1981

trouble making exciting fantasy characters and utilizing their full imagination. By having ready-made character builds of famous fictional characters, new players might not only be willing to overlook such imagined problems as social stigma and lack of creativity for the chance to imagine yourself as Robin Hood.

During this time, TSR was going through a small tumultuous period. The ousting of Gygax, a series of legal actions from TSR toward Mayfair Games for their line of “Role Aids”, a series of adventures and books that directly labeled “Suitable for *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*” that broke the trademark that TSR held on *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*⁴⁶, and an expansion into the book trade coming out of the first RPG industry bust in mid-1981. Though the lawsuits obviously were not discussed in *Dragon*, what did appear were ads for some of the books that TSR was trying to push. Books like Rose Estes’ *Endless Quest*, D&D fantasy themed adventure books in the spirit of Bantam Books’ *Choose Your Own Adventure* series.⁴⁷ Each game included a number of targeted fiction novels as well, and many books were released specifically for *D&D*, *Gamma World*, and *Top Secret*.⁴⁸

By around 1984 two major things had changed within *Dragon*. First and foremost was the near complete lack of support for war games. Nearly all of the readership of *Dragon* by this point were RPG players, and not primarily war gamers. *Dragon* had established itself as a premiere RPG magazine, and had successfully divested itself from its war game roots. This was definitely helped along by the ousting of Gygax and many of the older TSR employees who joined TSR through the LGTSA. However, more primarily, *Dragon* had evolved into fully fledged RPG magazine, following the explosion of the RPG industry and its now strict

⁴⁶ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 51

⁴⁷ *Dragon* #63, July 1982

⁴⁸ 46 *ibid.* Pg. 52

independence from the war games industry. Secondly, *Dragon* had begun to fully embrace its pan-RPG industry space as the foremost competitive magazine. In *Dragon* #90 Mike Beeman writes an article entitled “Playing the Political Game: A change of pace for AD&D game adventuring.”⁴⁹ This article specifically refers to AD&D, but the article itself does not refer to anything specific to AD&D. It mentions no rolls that need to be made, or statistics that need to be tracked that only apply to D&D. It brings in no monsters that only appear in D&D settings, and it calls for nothing specific to AD&D itself. In fact, the only way that this article pertains to AD&D is that it specifically refers to AD&D campaigns. Besides that, there is no substance that requires one play AD&D to gain from this article. *Dragon* again expands its scope with this article. All of the articles within *Dragon* before this point were somehow intimately tied to D&D. Whether they referenced specific rules of D&D, or referenced monsters that were under TSR copyright, *Dragon* specifically catered to D&D. This represents a transition to a more pan-RPG focus, with articles talking about the philosophical roots and storytelling techniques of making an RPG that do not require any single system. Those who read this article could easily replace every instance of AD&D with *Traveller*, or *Dragonquest*, and still gain just as much from it.

Though Gygax was seen as essentially exiled to the West Coast, he did a lot of good while over there. Though his dream of a D&D movie did not happen, he was able to sign an agreement with Marvel Comics films division to create a D&D cartoon which premiered on September 17, 1983, and ran three seasons until December 1985.⁵⁰ However TSR was having problems back at home, so much so that Brian and Kevin Blume made everyone in TSR write up why they should keep their jobs, and split the company into four separate organizations: TSR

⁴⁹ *Dragon* #90, October 1984

⁵⁰ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 56

Inc., TSR Entertainment, TSR Ventures, and TSR Worldwide Ltd. A series of layoffs left the company short-staffed, with still over a million dollars in debt, and is rumored to have attempted to sell *Dragon* for less around a million dollars. Gygax, through a cash inflow from the release of an AD&D supplement *Unearthed Arcana*, the recruitment of three outsiders from the American Management Association, and the use of stock options, was able to regain control of TSR, and reduced the debt of the company without giving up properties like *Dragon*. However, in a cost-cutting move, Gygax destroyed Dragon Publishing, the then name for TSR Periodicals, and brought *Dragon* into TSR, thus crushing the dreams of Tim Kask and turning *Dragon* into a house-organ, though not a complete house-organ, *Dragon* would maintain many of its aspects as a competitive magazine, albeit with a heavy bias toward being an advertising machine for TSR.⁵¹

This Gygaxian counter-revolution was becoming apparent by *Dragon* #100 in August 1985. Gygax began writing monthly in *Dragon*, and advertisements for *Unearthed Arcana* and *Oriental Adventures* began to appear.⁵² However, there was something different about these writings. Gygax had previously filled *Dragon* with his patent war game mindset and writing, and often acted as an authority on gaming rules in the previously discussed attempts to exert control over the playing of *D&D*. Now, however, both *D&D* and *Dragon* had evolved in the years Gygax was gone. Gygax reentered writing for *Dragon* with “Gord the Rogue” fiction. This counter-revolution was short, however. At the time in the fall of 1985, Gygax was the most famous and powerful figure in hobby gaming. However, he still jointly ran TSR with Brian and Kevin Blume, a couple of independent directors James Huber and Wesley Summer, and a newcomer by the name of Lorraine Williams. Gygax and his son Ernie owned about 51.1% of TSR stock, and thus majority control, he was untouchable. That is, until Brian Blume exercised

⁵¹ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 58-59

⁵² *Dragon* #100, August 1985

his stock option to purchase an additional 700 shares at a low price, an option issued to him in 1975. This put Gygax below majority stock ownership, and at a board meeting on October 22, 1985, nearly the entire director board turned against Gygax, removing him from presidency. Initially, Sommer was going to replace Gygax, but Williams was chosen after deliberation, much to Gygax's protest, claiming that she was unfit for she had only worked at TSR for six months. In addition, Williams had secretly bought all of the Blume family's shares, a total 1,690, putting her as the majority shareholder. Over the next few weeks, Gygax futilely tried to acquire stock from the Blumes, but they had already sold. So in New Years Eve of 1985, facing the prospect of living under the rule of a non-gamer in TSR, Gygax bid farewell to the company forever.⁵³ With Gygax left a number of others, including Kim Mohan who was replaced as editor of *Dragon* in time for *Dragon* #115 by Roger E. Moore.⁵⁴

Dragon, in its expansion into a pan-RPG magazine, began to show the mode of thought and the philosophy of writers within the RPG industry. In *Dragon* #108, Thomas M. Kane wrote an article entitled "Agents and A-Bombs". *Dragon* #108 was released in April 1986, a full three years before the Berlin Wall fell and the thawing of the Cold War. The effects of Cold War thought and the inherent fear of radiological weaponry is very apparent in Kane's article. "Agents and A-Bombs" is a supplement of additional rules for radioactive weapons for the game *Top Secret*, a game about secret agents and spy networks. *Top Secret* is mostly about government spying and James Bond like characters, with grand heroic missions to prevent mass death and destruction. In "Agents and A-Bombs", the article explicitly states "In the TOP SECRET game,

⁵³ Peterson, Jon. *The Ambush at Sheridan Springs: How Gygax Lost Control of Dungeons and Dragons*. Medium.com, July 28, 2014. <<https://medium.com/@increment/the-ambush-at-sheridan-springs-3a29d07f6836#.1v57r32kn>>

⁵⁴ *Dragon* #115, November 1986

an agent's role is to protect mankind from the use of nuclear devices."⁵⁵ There is an inherent fear of nuclear weaponry, and radiation is from there described at length, with gruesome detail given to the biological effects of radiation poisoning. The only type of radiological weapons that are even considered to be available for use by agents in *Top Secret* are X-Ray devices and Radium Powder, both harmless and useful for things more like examination and tracking than violence. It is a very expected mentality for those living during the Cold War era, *Dragon* is an interesting medium to see the mindset of the RPG industry, and it becomes quite clear that though RPG's were a niche market and a sub-culture of America at the time, RPG players and professionals were still very aware and very affected by the zeitgeist of American culture.

In a bit of foresight on the part of TSR, the company, and *Dragon*, began to embrace, in earnest, the contemporary and future role of computers in the RPG industry. In *Dragon* #126, October 1987, the column, "The Role of Computers" went monthly, written by Hartley and Patricia Lesser.⁵⁶ For years to come, *Dragon* would vehemently push computers and computer games, and TSR would invest heavily in computer games in the hopes of opening a new avenue for RPG's. They partnered with Strategic Simulations Inc. (SSI) to release *Pool of Radiance* in 1988, the first ever Computer Role-Playing Game (CRPG) licensed by TSR.⁵⁷

Pool of Radiance was a game based in *The Forgotten Realms* campaign setting released in 1987. The Forgotten Realms was a fully-fledged campaign world unlike any that had existed before. Many of the other settings, including *Greyhawk* an old setting by Gygax, *Mystara* the stock setting for Basic *D&D*, and *Dragonlance* a setting published in 1984 by Tracy and Laura Hickman that spanned a ton of various novels and adventures, were mostly described through

⁵⁵ *Dragon* #108, August 1986

⁵⁶ *Dragon* #126, October 1987

⁵⁷ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 75

individual books and adventures. The world would have to be pieced together at best, and many adventures did not mention areas from other adventures, and so even if they claimed to be in the same world, there was no way to draw a map. With the creators of these worlds all gone from TSR, the company decided to collaboratively create an entirely new world, led by Ed Greenwood. The Forgotten Realms subsumed a number of other settings including Zeb Cook's *Kara-Tur* and Douglas Niles' *Moonshae Isles*. The world was massive, a planetary scale effort to exhaustively map out the world, connecting each area to every other one. A series of sourcebooks, instead of adventures, made sure that The Forgotten Realms was powerful and versatile enough to support any type of fantasy campaign and fiction, which became a huge part, and is still a huge part of The Forgotten Realms setting in the present day.⁵⁸

Dragon, by 1989 officially renamed *Dragon Magazine*, was pushing more than just settings and fiction. In *Dragon Magazine* #146, Kevin Murphy wrote an article entitled *If You Wish Upon a Star*. In it, Murphy attempts to exhaustively classify and coordinate the types of wishes one may find in a fantasy setting. This information would be useful for anyone attempting to put a Genie in their game, or perhaps deal with wishing upon a star, as in the title. It doesn't really matter what the content of the article, but the article itself is quite interesting. It is not just a discussion of techniques for gaming, but an authoritative expose on the brand of fantasy that TSR endorsed. *Dragon Magazine* in this sense and instance, was, whether knowingly or unknowingly, pushing their own brand of fantasy upon their readers. Of course many of the campaign settings already dictated how certain animals worked within any given world, and *Dragon Magazine* had published many articles on the ecology of *D&D* before, but wishes were and are different than animals. Wishes are intangible, they are an idea, and they are not tied to

⁵⁸ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 72-74

one game world. A wish is something that could appear in any and all game worlds, including those not licensed by TSR. *Dragon Magazine* and TSR were attempting to create and participate in a “science of fantasy” in a way that affected more than just themselves and their worlds.⁵⁹

In 1987, in *Dragon Magazine* #117⁶⁰, TSR announced the second edition of *D&D*. The brainchild of Gygax who had suggested a second edition of *AD&D* all the way back in *Dragon* #90 in 1984, but the actual creation of Zeb Cook and Steve Winter, second edition was a massive step forward. The second edition books were concise, friendly to newer players, and good references for older players. As well, the game was re-written not only to be more understandable than the grandiose prose of Gygax, but to unite dungeon masters and players in making a game and knowing the rules together.⁶¹ Zeb Cook published a monthly column around this time entitled *Who Dies?* In *Dragon Magazine* in which TSR got feedback from the community on character classes. This was a real way for *Dragon Magazine* to be a mode of communication and interaction between readers and TSR. *AD&D2e* was released with much praise in early 1989.

Through this time, *Dragon Magazine* and TSR were sitting richly upon a bright golden age. The Forgotten Realms and *AD&D2e* dominated the RPG genre, and many of TSR’s other games were doing well. Their fiction was selling spectacularly, and new CRPG’s by SSI were making tons of money. TSR, through the intervention of former Flying Buffalo employee Michael Stackpole, had successfully weathered and rebuked the near continuous, decade-long onslaught of opposition to *D&D* led by fringe religious leaders and a woman named Patricia Pulling, who claimed her son committed suicide under a curse he received from playing *D&D*.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Dragon Magazine* #146, June 1989

⁶⁰ *Dragon* #117, January 1987

⁶¹ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 82

⁶² 61 *ibid.* Pg. 79-80

Under the leadership of Lorraine Williams, both entities were basking in prosperity. However, they had made few friends within the RPG industry through excessive IP hoarding and litigation. In addition, their prosperity was soon going to leave them as quickly as it came. The beginning of the end for TSR was foreshadowed in 1993, around *Dragon Magazine* #200, when ads for the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering* by Wizards of the Coast began to appear.⁶³

The End Years: Issue #200 (Dec 1993) – Issue #236 (Dec 1996)

By 1994, TSR was not content to sit on their laurels as a dominating force in the RPG market, and so had expanded their dominance through expanding their available campaign settings. However, they had printed too many: By 1994 TSR had, in circulation, though not necessarily in print: *The Forgotten Realms*, *Greyhawk Revised* [1990], *Mystara* [1980's], *Dragonlance* [1984], *Spelljammer* [1989] (A space setting that attempted to connect multiple TSR worlds through an interdimensional plane, which was replaced in 1994 by *Planescape*), *Ravenloft* [1990] (A horror setting that featured a pocket dimension of evil ruled over by an immortal vampire), *Dark Sun* [1991] (A gritty and hellish setting modeled as a challenge world for experienced gamers), *Al Qadim* [1992] (A middle-eastern style cultural setting), and *Planescape* [1994] (A trans-dimensional setting, replacing *Spelljammer*). In addition, TSR had a number of game systems, again not necessarily in print, but in circulation simultaneously: *AD&D 2e* [1989], *Top Secret Special Intelligence* [1987], *Boot Hill 3e* [1990], *Marvel Superheroes Advanced* [1986], *Dragonquest* [1980] *Gamma World 4e* [1992], *Metamorphosis: Alpha 2e* [1994], and *The Amazing Engine* [1993] (A generic setting-less system meant to be plugged into any setting). In the next few years *Dragon Magazine* continued to innovate, even as TSR declined.

⁶³ *Dragon Magazine* #200, December 1993

As early as *Dragon Magazine* #207⁶⁴ in July 1994 up to *Dragon Magazine* #220 in August 1995, the dominance of *Magic: The Gathering* over ad-space was un-ignorable. By #220, *Dragon Magazine* published more ad-space for *Magic: The Gathering* and other non-TSR products than TSR products itself.⁶⁵ These other games included anything from *The Generic Universal Role Playing System (GURPS)* by Steve Jackson Games, to *Vampire: The Masquerade* from White Wolf Games. Games like *Vampire* stand in stark contrast to *AD&D2e* with a less combat focused system, instead focusing on diplomacy, subtlety, in-party scheming, and storytelling in a 20th century setting heavily influenced by the goth and grunge of the 90's. King of these however, was *Magic: The Gathering (MtG)*, a collectible card game (CCG). CCG's were beginning to take over the market. Especially *MtG*, which played to the interest of fantasy fans, remained competitive, and was much more accessible than an RPG. The market grew so powerful that TSR created their own CCG entitled *Spellfire* in 1994 to combat *MtG*. *Spellfire* included designs by a number of TSR veterans, and grossed \$35 million in its first year, but by *Dragon Magazine* #220, the dominance of *MtG* was very apparent and *Spellfire* would never out-sell *MtG*. *Dragon Magazine* had become an engine of foreshadowing toward the eventual dominance of Wizards of the Coast, and was at this time, unknowingly and indirectly trumpeting the fall of TSR.

By 1995, TSR was desperate to capture a new market, the younger market. In *Dragon Magazine* #220, there appears an ad for TSR merchandise, shirts and sweaters. This would not be surprising were it not for the stark contrast in color scheme and tone to the rest of the issue. Most of the issue is black-and-white. The color portions are very bold colors overlaid on fantasy drawn scenes. This ad is a muted blue, with a fractal design like a torn piece of fabric with bold metallic

⁶⁴ *Dragon Magazine* #207, July 1994

⁶⁵ *Dragon Magazine* #220, August 1995

word-art saying “SHOW YOUR ALLEGIANCE” across the top. The ad includes two people, a male and a female, clad in the wide-brimmed hats, baggy shirts, round sun glasses, and cargo pants of young-adult and teen fashion at the time. *Dragon Magazine* was paying attention to the younger crowd, and was actively advertising to them.⁶⁶

In addition, *Dragon Magazine* was also paying attention to national activist trends. Appearing in *Dragon Magazine* #230 was an ad for the National Arbor Day Foundation.⁶⁷ In *Dragon Magazine* #235 appears an ad for the American Heart Association about child overuse of television and the problems of childhood obesity.⁶⁸ *Dragon Magazine* was participating in these national trends and showing the activist tendencies of its writers and publishers.

Starting in *Dragon Magazine* #225, in January 1996 all articles and ads for non-TSR lines were nearly completely wiped out. It was heralded as a “redesign”, but was certainly a reaction to the decline of TSR and *Dragon Magazine* at the time.⁶⁹ TSR was displaying supporting material for discontinued TSR worlds, and pushed a greater focus on art and fiction, with full-page drawings and long stories within the pages. This is partially because of desperation on the part of TSR and *Dragon Magazine*, but also partially new leadership of editor Pierce Watters. In the previous few years, *Dragon Magazine* had undergone a rapid change in leadership. Roger E. Moore was replaced after #198 by Kim Mohan, who stayed until #217 and then was replaced by a TSR writer named Wolfgang Baur. Baur only edited three issues before being replaced by Pierce Watters for #222. Watters was not a bad leader, and *Dragon Magazine* was still an attractive read and desirable purchase, but it really showed the desperation of TSR and its constantly loosening grip on the market it created. In this issue Watters writes that he

⁶⁶ *Dragon Magazine* #220, August 1995

⁶⁷ *Dragon Magazine* #230, June 1996

⁶⁸ *Dragon Magazine* #235 November 1996

⁶⁹ *Dragon Magazine* #225, January 1996

intends *Dragon Magazine* to be “the single most indispensable aid for gamers after the basic books.” *Dragon Magazine* also made sure to push any and all TSR lines near exclusively, again crushing the dreams of Tim Kask to keep *The Dragon* from becoming a true house-organ. Most importantly, there were no ads for Wizards of the Coast products, namely *MtG*. Whispers abounded in the RPG industry that the former titan of RPGs was having serious trouble selling products and *Dragon Magazine* showed that in full form. Perhaps the most obvious failure that TSR attempted at the time was their foray into real-time strategy (RTS) computer games with ads for *Blood & Magic*, an AD&D2e based RTS, appearing in *Dragon Magazine* #235 in November 1996.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, TSR was late to this party, as the kings of RTS, Westwood Studios and Blizzard Entertainment, had already released their titan RTS games *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, and *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*.

Conclusion

Dragon Magazine continued on until 2013 in print, and continues in online fashion until today. However TSR would not be so lucky. *Dragon Magazine* #236 in December 1996, would be the final issue before the end of an independent TSR. TSR had innovated to the end, and never gave up until the very last moment. With the release of *Spellfire* [1994], *Dragon Dice* [1995] (A new take on the CCG market by making an analogous game with collectible dice), *Birthright Campaign Setting* [1995] (A campaign setting by Richard Baker and Colin McComb focused on a setting open to players becoming rulers and lords to play in a game of diplomacy and warfare), *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* [1996] (A revival campaign of *Dragonlance*), *Dragons of Summer Flame* [1995] (A new piece of fiction for *Dragonlance*), and innovation toward another game called *Alternity* that couldn't be released in time, it is evident that TSR was not giving up

⁷⁰ *Dragon Magazine* #235, November 1996

on life. The fall of TSR was multi-faceted, but nearly inevitable given their circumstance. Lorriane Williams, a non-gamer who cared little for gaming and the RPG hobby ran TSR ragged, the CCG industry shrunk the RPG industry, and *AD&D2e* was unbalanced to the point of absurdity with multiple errata and secondary source books that cared little for balance with existing lore and classes, and a mind-boggling plethora of settings and sourcebooks for each, with each dying in a few years. In addition, book sales had failed miserably while TSR and Random House, their bookseller distributor at the time, were fronting loans taken in TSR's name against those book sales that never came, and finally TSR fell behind on payments to other distributors and logistics companies, and as a result, had their product locked down.⁷¹

So, by the end of 1996, TSR was in debt, with millions of unsold products, and no way to distribute more. On April 10, 1977, it was announced that in a deal with Ryan Dancey and Bob Abramowitz of Five-Rings Publishing, and Peter Adkison, president of Wizards of the Coast, that Wizards was going to purchase both Five-Rings Publishing and TSR for about \$30 million. TSR would continue on as a subsidiary of Wizards of the Coast for a few more years until 2000, when Wizards retired the TSR name and published their own *Dungeons and Dragons* 3rd Edition and a new "D20 System License" that allowed fans and homebrew game artists to make and distribute games using the D20 system (This is the system that *D&D* uses, it merely means that the game centers its gameplay around using a 20-sided die) as long as they don't infringe on direct copyrighted *D&D* material.⁷²

As for *Dragon Magazine*, it marched on as ever before. This time published by Wizards of the Coast, *Dragon Magazine* encountered a fourth-golden age in the early 2000's with the younger crowd, and shared in the prosperity that Wizards of the Coast was bringing to *D&D*.

⁷¹ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* 106-107

⁷² 71 *ibid.* 106-107

Dragon Magazine, however, was more than just a magazine. Eventually, however, the cost and profitability of a published print magazine was too much and so, after *Dragon Magazine* #430 in December 2013, the magazine was shut down.

TSR was not a bad company, and the founders of TSR were avid gamers who loved their hobby and their fans. However, TSR was plagued by management issues from its creation that inevitably led to its downfall. TSR enjoyed a meteoric rise only because it was the first company of its kind and *D&D* was the first real RPG. Gygax was slow to capture the market that spawned right under his nose, the Blumes ousted Gygax, who was arguably the most business savvy among them, and instituted Lorraine Williams who did not at all understand the culture her company participated in. TSR continually produced too many games and too many settings, they initially captured war game converts, but struggled to bring a lot of non-gamers into the hobby despite *Dragon Magazine*'s best efforts, as time wore excessive litigation gave them a bad reputation, and they made bad deals with companies like Random House that left them bankrupt. The leaders of TSR always seemed to understand only gaming culture or business, but never both at the same time. *D&D* and *Dragon Magazine* were the only two things that TSR truly ever did right, and that is why both of those existed long after TSR was dissolved. *Dragon Magazine* was always the foremost RPG publication on the market, and captured the imagination of the first generation of RPG players. The magazine served as more than just a good read, it was a cultural force, a window into not only the history but the minds of TSR, it was a voice for activists, a marker for the growth of the RPG industry, a direct and indispensable resource and storytelling tool for gamers, a vehicle for TSR to exert force on the RPG community, and a consistent source of entertainment. *Dragon Magazine* was as ubiquitous within the RPG hobby as *D&D* itself, and was a defining element and pillar of an entire sub-culture.

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